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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study in which classroom teachers were asked to describe their perceptions of the principalship and to identify factors that influenced the development of their perceptions. Forty-five elementary, middle, and high school teachers, all of whom were enrolled in a course designed to facilitate the transition of teachers from the classroom to the principalship, participated. The teachers' written narratives and use of language were analyzed, using the constructivist theory of knowledge and learning, to identify the teachers' existing perceptions of leadership as exercised by school principals. The results show that the teachers used hierarchical terms to describe the power vested in building principals. The teachers expected principals to manage the school, to foster a culture conducive to learning, to improve student learning, to promote the school's image to the community, and to influence the larger community. Few teachers reported having opportunities to engage in dialogue with principals and some reported that they formed their impressions of principals at an early age. Some of the teachers relied on family values to justify or explain their perceptions. The narratives provided information about factors that influence individual teacher's learning and the processes that teachers use to synthesize information. (RJM)

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Teacher Perceptions of Leadership: How Do They Emerge?

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Teacher Perceptions of Leadership: How Do They Emerge?

Prior to enrolling in formal leadership preparation programs, classroom teachers have the opportunity to observe and interact with principals for extensive periods of time. How do these experiences influence the development of teacher perceptions of leadership? How do teachers process the conflicting information gained through such experiences?

Intrigued by these questions, we asked classroom teachers to describe their perceptions of principalship and to identify factors that influenced the development of their perceptions. Forty-five elementary, middle and high school teachers responded to our request. The responding teachers were enrolled in a course designed to facilitate the transition of teachers from the classroom to principalship.

We analyzed the written narratives to identify the teachers' existing perceptions of leadership as exercised by school principals. We used the constructivist theory of knowledge and learning as a framework to understand the processes that the teachers used to develop their perceptions of leadership. We also examined how teachers used language to explain and justify their perceptions.

Existing Perceptions

The teachers used hierarchical terms to describe the power vested in building principals. Principals have "monumental" influence, are the top authority in the school" and are a "vital force" in the lives of others. Principals have more influence than anyone else on school climate, on the school and on public education. Although principals have the opportunity to "affect many lives in a positive manner", they can use their power

destructively. A principal can "either make or break a school" and either "motivates or depresses the students, the classified and certified personnel".

Despite such lofty rhetoric regarding the principal's power, the teachers tended to be realistic about the rewards and challenges associated with principalship. On the positive side, the teachers perceived principalship as a complex, diverse and fulfilling position that provides individuals with intrinsic rewards. Less positively, the teachers perceived principalship as a stressful, time consuming, difficult, and thankless job. One teacher offered this succinct assessment of the demands of principalship:

> The weight of the entire school is on your shoulders. If testing doesn't go well, it is your job to take the heat and then find ways to improve. Stress! Stress! Stress! No longer is it a job…from 8:00 to 3:00. Now there are activities in place around the clock in schools. Time is of the essence….

The teachers specified the traits and skills needed for effective principalship. Principals ought to be moral, principled, diligent, and dedicated persons with common sense and a strong work ethic. They need to be open-minded and have the ability to understand the imperfections in others. They should have emotional intelligence, know their personal strengths, and ask for help in areas of weakness. In addition to these leadership traits, teachers believe principals should have people skills, social skills, and organizational skills.

Teachers expect principals to manage the school, to foster a school climate and culture conducive to learning, to improve student learning, to promote the school's image to the community, and to influence the larger community. To achieve these purposes,

teachers believe principals should trust the staff, avoid dictating to others, and "emit firmness, fairness, and consistency when dealing with students".

A Theoretical Framework

Constructivism, a theory of knowledge and learning, provided a useful framework for understanding how the teachers formulated their existing perceptions. Constructivists contend that individuals learn through experience, collaborative discourse, and reflection (Brooks & Brooks, 1992). From the constructivist perspective, we learn or develop perceptions by synthesizing new experiences into our existing perceptions. We develop rules for interpreting new experiences. When new experiences conflict with our existing perceptions, we either modify our existing rules or devise new ones. We use tools, such as language, to interpret new experiences.

Do Teachers Learn From Experience?

The teachers reported that their experiences as students and teachers influenced their perceptions of the principalship. For example, a teacher recounted how he developed his initial understanding of the power afforded to principals.

> My first encounter with a principal was in the first grade. I…remember…that there was one gentleman [who] seemed to stand head and shoulders above the rest. It seemed that he…was showing the way for everyone else.

Engaging in collaborative work with principals influenced teacher understanding of the scope of the principal's job. A teacher observed that working closely with a principal "opened my mind to all that a principal does." Prior to engaging in such work, even veteran teachers reported having minimal awareness of the principal's job:

> I have been in education for 23 years as an instructor and a coach; however, it has been only recently that I have paid attention to the principal's duties and responsibilities. I worked very closely last year with our administration and actually helped with some of those responsibilities while our principal was ill. This day-to-day, hands-on type of work helped to develop my perceptions and decision making more than anything else.

The teachers developed their perceptions of the skills needed for effective leadership by assessing the relative effectiveness of the leadership behaviors of principals. A male middle school drew the following conclusions after observing the behaviors of two principals:

> The first one [principal] ran the school without much input from the faculty…. The second principal did not use…common sense. He was not a people person, so he had a lot of trouble with parents and staff. I believe using a little common sense and letting the staff and parents know what is going on are some of the most important things in being a principal.

Do Teachers Learn From Collaborative Discourse?

Few teachers reported having opportunities to engage in dialogue with principals. Only one teacher reported having friends that are principals and hearing about their experiences. Another teacher actively sought out opportunities to interact with principals by "attend[ing] workshops and conferences that aren't just…filled with teachers, but principals as well…."

It is unclear from these narratives why conversations between principals and teachers appeared to have minimal influence on the development of teacher perceptions

of leadership. Perhaps teachers underestimate the influence of dialogue when it occurs during the collaborative work process rather than as an isolated activity.

Do Teachers Learn by Engaging in Reflection?

As early as primary school, the teachers began to reflect on principal behaviors. An African American female talked about her early perceptions of the treatment of students by building principals.

> During my primary [and] secondary years, I felt that the principals were cold and very non-caring to students in the lower SES. The interactions…were always negative…. Throughout the years I have envisioned serving as an administrator, and those negative perceptions serve as a reminder that a principal has to emit firmness, fairness, and consistency for all students.

She added that she did not develop positive perceptions of principalship until adulthood.

Tracing the evolution of this teacher's rules for understanding leadership assists in understanding how teachers process conflicting information about leadership. The teacher entered elementary school with a specific expectation or rule about how leaders should behave (Leaders should treat individuals from all economic and social strata equitably). When her school experiences presented her with discrepant information, she extended the rule (Leaders should treat individuals from all economic and social strata equitably but principals do not do so).

As an adult, her positive experiences generated information that was inconsistent with her extended rule. She refined her extended rule (Effective principals treat individuals from all economic and social strata equitably but ineffective principals do not). The teacher synthesized the negative perceptions of her childhood with her more

positive perceptions as an adult by continually revising her rule for understanding leadership. The outcome of this elongated and self-regulated learning process is that the teacher now perceives that, to be effective, principals should deal with students firmly, fairly, and consistently.

Some teachers adjust their perceptions of principalship in response to school reform initiatives. A male teacher observed the leadership behaviors of principals prior to and after the passage of the Kentucky Educational Reform Act of 1990 (KERA). He labeled principals who place emphasis on student behavior as "old guard" and principals who place emphasis on student performance and accountability as "new style". He described the two goals of leadership as extremes on a continuum.

His existing perception is that effective principals stay "in the middle of the road" by focusing on both student behavior and student learning. Consistent with the principles of constructivist theory, he synthesized his new experience with school reform initiatives into his existing perceptions.

Language as a Tool for Learning

The teachers used metaphors and allusions to explain their perceptions. With missionary-like zeal, a teacher described principalship as a "vocation or a calling that will consume most of a person's working hours". A male teacher used military and business terms to describe the principal as the "top person in the chain of command" and a "CEO". Using concepts from the academic disciplines, teachers described principals as "the heart of the school" and indicated that principals have "a great impact on the personality of the school".

Some of the teachers relied on family values to justify or explain their perceptions. Why should principals create an environment where all children have an equal opportunity to learn? Because "When I visit baby nurseries…I see no labels, no categories". Why should principals work collaboratively with others? To emulate the actions of parents who "are two individual persons, but focus on one common goal or many common goals".

From Individual to Reciprocal Learning

The insights provided by these teachers have practical implications for classroom teachers who aspire to be principals. Teachers can take pro-active steps to learn how to exercise leadership effectively. To increase their knowledge about the role, they can actively seek opportunities to work and engage in dialogue with principals. They can consciously and purposefully revise and extend their existing perceptions of principalship by reflecting on their experiences and conversations.

The narratives provided information about factors that influence individual teacher learning and the processes that individual teachers use to synthesize information. However, leadership as exercised by principals is not an individual activity. Linda Lambert (1998) contends that, in order to construct meaning toward a shared purpose, leaders engage in reciprocal learning processes. Perhaps understanding how teachers construct meaning individually assists in the development of reciprocal learning processes.

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